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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IDF EASES ACCESS AND MOVEMENT IN THE WEST BANK,
BUT MANY OBSTACLES REMAIN

REF: A) JERUSALEM 898 B) JERUSALEM 896 C) JERUSALEM
614 D) JERUSALEM 479 E) JERUSALEM 288

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles for reasons 1.4 (b), d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The IDF has taken measures to ease access and movement around a number of West Bank cities since February 2009. The IDF's removal of checkpoints and road obstacles and the easing of restrictions at several manned checkpoints has directly benefited the Nablus, Qalqiliya, Ramallah and Jericho areas. In many instances, however, these measures have been accompanied by other restrictive actions, e.g. erecting new obstacles or increasing the frequency of "flying checkpoints" in the same areas. Other important checkpoints appear to have become more entrenched through infrastructure upgrades. The overall West Bank road obstacle count, now 613, is down only slightly. End summary.

Significant Improvements in Some Areas;
New Restrictions in Others

¶2. (C) The most significant easings that have occurred since February include:

- Removing Bani Naim road obstacles east of Hebron (on/about February 15), which opened direct access for about 20,000 local residents to Route 60, the West Bank's main north-south highway, and to Hebron (ref E);
- Dismantling Beit Iba checkpoint (March 15), which controlled access to western Nablus. The IDF, however, constructed a new replacement checkpoint about two kilometers to the west that is "normally open" (meaning the checkpoint is manned but soldiers do not generally stop vehicles) (ref D);
- Removing two road obstacles west of Nablus (late March) that had blocked western villages' access to the city center. The IDF, however, installed new road gates that blocked the villages' access to Route 60 (ref C);
- Changing Asira ash-Shamalia checkpoint north of Nablus 24 to "normally open" status 24 hours/day and removing some infrastructure (June 3) (ref B);
- Changing Atara checkpoint, which controls a main northern access route to Ramallah, to "normally open" status June 3 (ref B). Within the last week, however, there have been at least two "flying checkpoints" on the same route that have reimposed controls on movement;
- Removing infrastructure at the Rimoni/At-Tayba partial checkpoint on a main Ramallah-Jericho road (June 3). IDF "flying checkpoints" in this area, however, are common (ref B), and infrastructure upgrades are underway at Yitav checkpoint about ten kilometers to the east;
- Changing two checkpoints controlling access to Qalqiliya, which is surrounded on three sides by the barrier, to "normally open" status (June 5);

-- Opening and removing most infrastructure at the Jericho DCO checkpoint (June 14), the southern access road to the city.

Overall Obstacle Count Holds at Over 600

¶3. (SBU) The openings have not significantly reduced the overall obstacle count in the West Bank. OCHA announced on June 24 that, after months of discussions, joint field trips, and detailed cross-checking, OCHA and the IDF Central Command had come to an agreed obstacle count of 613. This is a slight reduction from OCHA's February 2009 total (626). OCHA's overall obstacle count has remained relatively stable over the past year (up from 607 in May 2008). (Comment: While the IDF has focussed on easing movement at manned checkpoints, numerous road gates and other fixed obstacles continue to impede movement in many areas. End Comment.)

Other Key Checkpoints More Entrenched

¶4. (C) While removals and openings have occurred in some areas, checkpoint infrastructure has become more entrenched in others. The IDF recently completed, or is in the process of infrastructure "upgrades" -- e.g., new asphalt, more traffic lanes and road dividers, new guard booths, etc, -- at a number of West Bank checkpoints, including:

-- Yitav, which controls a main road between Ramallah and Jericho (under construction);
-- Enav, which controls the main road to Tulkarem and a major

JERUSALEM 00001079 002 OF 002

commercial crossing terminal at Sha'ar Ephraim (completed in June);

-- Container/Wadi Nar, which controls the main north-south road east of Jerusalem (completed in early 2009);
-- Huwwara, the main checkpoint controlling access to southeast Nablus (new pedestrian facilities completed in December 2008).

Remaining Priority Obstacles

¶5. (C) While the GOI's recent easing of restrictions on access and movement are significant for the cities of Nablus, Jericho, Qalqiliya and, to a lesser extent, Ramallah, many priority obstacles remain. In Hebron area, for example, the mayor and local businessmen are pressing for removal of key two road gates, one near Bait Haggay settlement that blocks the main southern access road to the city, and one (Farsh al-Hawa) that restricts access from northwestern Hebron to Route 35, a major east-west highway (ref A). The Jordan Valley, blocked by four major checkpoints (Yitav/Al Auja, Ma'ale Efrayim, Hamra, and Tayasir), remains off-limits to most Palestinians. The Bet El DCO checkpoint and Route 466 road obstacles control Ramallah's eastern access road, and the main route between Tulkarem and Jenin, Route 585, remains blocked to Palestinians by the Mevo Dotan checkpoint and Hermesh settlement road gate. Access from Salfit to neighboring villages is blocked by a road gate near the Ariel settlement.

¶6. (C) At a meeting between IDF officials and PA security chiefs in Bethlehem on June 24, the IDF reportedly said that it will open Huwwara checkpoint south of Nablus later this week. Although the infrastructure and soldiers will remain in place, PA security officials report that the IDF said it will allow free flow of traffic except in extreme situations.

In the same meeting, the IDF reportedly offered new, unspecified, improvements around Hebron in the coming weeks.

¶7. (C) Comment: Overall, the impact of recent steps is positive, but much more remains to be done to allow Palestinians to move freely in the West Bank. We believe

that positive reaction by the USG to these steps should be tailored to encourage further progress.

WALLES